

Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady Study Guide

**Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady by Florence
King**

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Plot Summary

"Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady" by Florence King is a memoir about King's years with her grandmother who attempts to rear her as a Southern lady. King is academically gifted in her youth and much of her story details her struggle to balance her education with the behavior expected of a lady. "Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady" is an extremely entertaining and at times, comical relation of King's formative years which details the influences that created King as a woman and a writer.

Since Granny's attempts to raise Mama as a Southern lady fail, she is eager for a second chance to rear a lady when Florence is born about a year after Mama marries Herb, so she moves in with them. Granny attempts to train Florence to become a lady while Herb educates her. When the family takes a vacation to Colonial Beach, Evelyn causes a scene by claiming her womb is falling out, but Florence is relieved when Herb tells her she does not have to be like Evelyn when she grows up. Florence is promoted to Kindergarten A because she is too advanced for Kindergarten B which worries Granny because ladies should not be too bright. Granny and Jency force Florence to accompany them on their temporal acts of mercy, visiting the sick and such.

Herb tells Mama, Granny and Florence that it is impossible for an American woman to be feminine because they have no defining goddesses. After being threatened by Harriet Mudd when she tries to be friendly, Florence learns not to try to make herself liked. When Granny inherits a house on 14th Street, the family moves in, and Granny insists upon asking Jency to live with them. In high school, Florence suffers from menstrual cramps and since the doctor has to break her hymen to examine her, he gives her a certificate of virginity so her husband will know he is not getting damaged goods. Florence chooses not to date in high school and she labels the non-academic girls as malkins or women who fear not being like everyone else. She studies French and begins to idolize Berenice.

Florence attends college at American University because she acquires a scholarship, but she is distraught when she learns she cannot major in French and must switch her major to History. She joins a sorority to obtain dates to appease her sexual desires, but she quits the sorority after attending Marine camp one summer when she returns to the sorority and her sisters mock the female Marines as lesbians. Worried about becoming a malkin after graduation, Florence applies for and receives a fellowship to the University of Mississippi. After obtaining a diaphragm, she loses her virginity to Dr. Newton.

At the University of Mississippi, Florence meets Bres and falls in love, though she cannot spend the night because they fear the anonymous phone calls Bres has received in the past. Since Florence wants to be with Bres forever, she agrees to Bres' suggestion that she apply for fellowships, but when she finds a call for confession stories, she writes and submits two stories. Florence is excited when her stories are accepted, but Bres is furious because she wanted Florence to apply for a fellowship, ending their relationship as a result. Soon after, Bres is killed in a car accident, and



Florence responds by sleeping with numerous men. Florence finishes her year at the University of Mississippi by ignoring her thesis and writing more stories.

Back in Washington D. C., Florence tells her family about becoming a writer and moves to her own apartment while searching for other lesbians in vain since she is lonely. When Jency dies, Herb eulogizes her as a lady and soon after, Granny decides to sell the house on 14th Street and move back to the family homestead in Ballston, Virginia with Mama, Herb and Florence. When Granny has to be placed in a nursing home, Florence finally meets other lesbians through the daughter of one of Granny's neighbors, Mrs. Kincaid. After Granny dies, Florence argues with Evelyn that Granny and Jency were not ladies. Instead, they were viragoes or women of great courage, strength, and stature who are not conventionally feminine. Mama has always known she was different, but now she understands it is because she is a virago.



Prologue & Chapter 1

Prologue & Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

"Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady" by Florence King is a memoir about King's years with her grandmother who attempts to rear her as a Southern lady. King is academically gifted in her youth, and much of her story details her struggle to balance her education with the behavior expected of a lady. "Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady" is an extremely entertaining and, at times, comical relation of King's formative years which details the influences that created King as a woman and a writer.

In the Prologue, ladies enjoy a generic recognition only in the South, and one must study the Southern woman in order to understand the American woman whose successful rearing results in that "perfection of femininity known as a lady" (pg. 1.) The narrator and author, Florence King, was reared as she was raised in the South. On the day of her first menstruation, her grandmother gave her a clipping from "Daughters" magazine about how God fashioned the Southern girl from all the wonders of His creation. Granny worked hard to make Florence into a lady since Mama, Florence's mother, had defeated her. Recounting her years with Granny, Florence leaves it up to the reader to decide whether Granny succeeded in making her a lady.

In Chapter 1, Florence's Mama was born in 1908 and grew up on a dirt road in Ballston, and after her father died, Botetourt, her older brother, left Granny and Mama alone to fight hopelessly about Mama's image. Never interested in creating appearances, Mama quit school at age 15, went to work for the telephone company and joined their softball team. Since she could do nothing about Mama, Granny searched for a malleable girl to be her surrogate daughter which she could make into a Southern lady, and she found this in her niece, Evelyn Cunningham, who lived with Aunt Nana Fairbanks, Granny's neighbor and relative through marriage. Evelyn had mental and female issues, so Granny and Aunt Nana fought over whose side of the family, the Cunninghams or the Uptons, these issues came from. When Aunt Nana tried to send Evelyn to an insane asylum, she ran to Granny and stayed for two years, proving to be "the malleable daughter of her dreams" (pg. 9.) With her catatonic seizures and frequent disappearances, Evelyn became the most popular hysteric in Virginia, and the men were enthralled by her intense femininity. Only Preston Hunt, a man who was never manly enough for his father, was immune to her charms, and he began courting Mama because she met his emotional needs. Mama put up with him to prove she could catch a beau like Evelyn. No matter how often Mama told him to leave her alone, he always came back, and after he was sent to the hospital during a dance, Mama was saved from being forced to hold a vigil by his bedside by the approach of a man, Herbert King, who returns Preston's cigarette case which he found in the men's room. At dinner the following Sunday, Herb expounds on the subject of his immediate family to tease Granny as his parents and brother died horrifically and his sister became a prostitute. Having fallen in love with Herb at first sight, Evelyn elopes with her beau who catches her at a weak moment after she is rejected by Herb. A week later, Herb begins courting



Mama, though they have nothing in common except that neither of them had turned out the way they were supposed to. As she says, "my parents were sui generis: they had invented themselves" (pg. 18.) Despite Herb's infrequent work, Granny is overjoyed when Mama married Herb since he is an Englishman.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Though Granny wants Herb and Mama to live with her, they set up house in a two room apartment on Park Road in Northwest Washington D. C. since Herb liked the city. The only convenience is the long hallway which allowed Herb to avoid waking Mama when he returned from work in the early hours of the morning, and he read until Mama woke. When Mama gets pregnant shortly before their first anniversary, Granny rushes to stay with Mama, worried about her daughter being alone at night while Herb worked. When Granny hires Jency Custis, a black woman who worked for her in Ballston, to clean the house once a week, Jency and Granny dissuade Mama from giving birth in a hospital. Herb buys a second rollaway bed and moves to the living room, causing Granny to praise him for being so considerate. Near the end of Mama's pregnancy, Granny eyes her belly and predicts the baby will be a girl. On New Years Eve, Mama begins getting contractions, but when her labor begins in earnest four days later, Florence is born. Insisting on staying to look after Mama and the baby, Granny has her neighbors bring her belongings for over a year, though she never officially moves in with Herb and Mama. She cannot resist a second chance to raise a lady.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

After she is weaned, Florence passes exclusively into Granny's hands who refuses the idea of babies having tender stomachs and fed Florence various foods, including coffee. She sleeps on the sofa bed with Granny after she outgrows her crib, and Granny begins training Florence to be a lady with duets they sang together in bed. Herb never returns to sleeping in Mama's room, and Florence always calls her father "Herb." She suggests her family allowed it because of an unconscious desire to view Mama, Herb and Florence as siblings with Granny at the matriarchal helm. Herb takes Florence to the library with him during the day, and he teaches her to print her name and write in script. Though Jency still comes once a week, she spends her time gossiping with Granny as they polish silver to teach Florence the ladylike virtue of caring for her belongings. Agnosticism runs in the family with Herb believing in reincarnation, Mama insisting that dead is dead, and Granny's Biblical theology being "energated by her superiority complex" (pg. 36-37.) However, she believed in Heaven since it was a lady-like place and convince Mama and Herb to accompany her to church about once every six weeks. After church, they visit the family plot in Congressional Cemetery to see Florence's grandfather's grave and the grave of Charlie, Mama's brother who died of polio when Mama was a baby. As Granny tells Florence about Charlie's illness and death, Mama watches with mute pleading, and Florence realizes Charlie was Granny's favorite child, and his death caused Mama to become a tomboy in order to replace the son Granny had lost. Most Sundays, they visit Aunt Nana with whom Granny discusses female complications, a topic Herb refers to as the Ovariad. Though Granny objects to Mama cursing in front of Florence, it is acceptable for Florence to listen to the Ovariad as it is part of her training to become a lady. Mama is a klutz, and at the age of four, Florence is convinced Mama is trying to kill her. While going for Chinese food one day, Mama wraps Florence in her coat since it was cold, but Florence trips and busts her mouth on the curb. Mama's resulting care causes Florence to beg for Granny. A few months later, Mama knocks Florence in the head while teaching her to bat, and Florence is more convinced than ever that Mama is trying to kill her. Florence loves Granny the most of her three caregivers, but she was concerned with "that vital primitive priority: to a small child, especially a female one, it's the mother who counts, even if she comes in third in a race of three" (pg. 47.) Florence remains certain that Mama is trying to kill her until second grade when Mama proves her love with two heroic acts.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Florence's family is evicted from the apartment on Park Road in January 1941 because the structure is condemned, so Herb rushes out, returning two hours later with his usual serenity because he has signed a lease on a two bedroom apartment around the corner at 1020 Monroe since it has an alcove off the master bedroom. Frazzled by the noise from the streetcars which can be heard through their open windows, Florence's family vacations at Colonial Beach in August with their extended family, including Evelyn whose presence was "destined to make the summer of 1941 a season that would live in imbecility" (pg. 51.) Evelyn throws herself at Granny, hysterical that the doctor thinks she is mentally defective, and Granny insists Evelyn just has a descending womb like all of the Upton women. However, Herb believes "she's suffering from historical displacement brought on by her unsuccessful struggle to be a Southern belle" (pg. 52.) Evelyn causes a scene that evening when she screams that her womb is falling out, but an ambulance takes her to the hospital in Fredericksburg where the doctor insists her womb is fine. Herb is in a foul mood when they return to Colonial Beach, and during a walk the next day, he instructs Florence not to listen to Granny's crazy theories. Florence is relieved to learn she does not have to grow up to be like Evelyn. That fall, Florence starts Kindergarten B, and Mama takes her to school the first day. All of the other children cry, annoying Florence who nods to assure Mama she is fine and Mama can leave. When the teacher instructs her students to draw something, Florence sketches R. M. S. Titanic since Herb just told her about it, and after she explains it to the teacher, she is sent home with a note for Mama which says Florence is too advanced for Kindergarten B and should report for Kindergarten A the next day. Granny worries Florence because it "doesn't do for a girl to be too bright" (pg. 61), and seeing it as an affront to her ladysmithery, she forces Florence to submit to knitting lessons. Florence makes a scarf for Herb's birthday, changing colors daily so that Granny and Jency are horrified with the completed project. However, Herb praises the scarf and takes special care of it.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Herb is ineligible for war because of his flat feet and weak eyes, but Mama goes into a patriotic frenzy, buying war stamps and smashing anything made in Japan. Fascinated by the bulletproof Bibles soldiers carry, she buys one to carry in her suit pocket, but when she teaches Florence war songs, Granny objects that Florence will grow up warped. Her idea of an un-warped female is one who comforts the sick and afflicted so she forces Florence to accompany her and Jency on temporal acts of mercy to counter Mama's influence. While Granny's charitable acts spring from a desire to be recognized as a great lady, Jency has a strongly developed sense of Christian charity, and they force Florence to help them tend the sick and attend funerals. This is different from playing war games with Mama because it is "feminine." While Herb and Mama scorn their own gender and get along with the opposite, Florence dislikes everyone and hates recess because she is forced to play with the other children. Miss Tanner, Florence's nemesis, cannot believe the girl does not want to be popular. Florence's face is part of her problem because pretty girls are not supposed to be misanthropic. When Miss Tanner notes on Florence's report card that she is unfriendly and does not get along with her peers, Mama responds with a disparaging remark which causes the principal, Miss Ballinger, to contact Mama. Miss Ballinger decides that Florence will skip 3A because of her excellent grades, causing Granny to fear her granddaughter will be an old maid. Florence likes 3B and gets along well with her new teacher, Mrs. Otter. She is happy Mama rescued her since she takes Granny's love for granted, "but Mama's love was more precious because my sex had been a disappointment to her" (pg. 75.) Mama surpasses herself a few months later when Uncle Botetourt decides to replace the old tombstones in Congressional Cemetery with one big market. Florence objects to him taking Charlie's lamb, and after many arguments between Mama and her brother, Aunt Charlotte convinces Uncle Botetourt to pay to remove the lamb so Florence can keep it. Mama refuses to allow him to give them anything, so against Granny's objections, Mama borrows a pickax and a shovel, driving to the cemetery and removing the lamb. Florence sees Mama as her "parfit ungentil knight-mother" (pg. 78.)



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

At the end of the war, GIs return to America praising the European woman's perfect femininity, but Herb, paraphrasing Henry Adams, says it is "culturally impossible for the American woman to be feminine because she has no defining goddesses" (pg. 81.) He angers Granny when he claims there are many counterfeit versions of femininity, like the Southern belle. At first, Granny argues when Mama decides to return to work, but since Mama cannot be dissuaded, she lectures her on the proper way to tell Herb in order to make him think it is his idea. Mama begins her speech but quickly blurts out that she is thinking of going back to work, and Herb says it is up to her so Mama returns to work. At the end of sixth grade, Florence's class is given an IQ test without being told what it is, and Ann Hopkins, an overdeveloped girl in the class, explains they are determining where to put each person in the junior high track. She wants to be in 7A2 because it is important for girls to be average. On a rainy September day, Florence walks to Powell Jr. High with Peg and Helen, and the principal assigns students to their classes. Peg, Helen, Florence and Ann Hopkins are all assigned to 7A3 and follow Miss Ogilvy to their class. Florence feels very insecure because her wet raincoat makes her smell, so when a new student, Harriet Mudd, appears and Miss Ogilvy asks someone to share their locker, Florence volunteers. Her attempts to be friendly meet with Harriet threatening to kill her if she ever touches the locker again, and since she has no one to turn to, Florence simply carries her books everywhere until the end of the week. Her problem is solved that weekend when Harriet is killed by her father driving the family onto the railroad tracks. Granny insists on going to the funeral to pay their respects. She is pleased by Florence's show of womanly grief, but Florence learns a more valuable lesson: "I never again tried to make myself liked" (pg. 96.)



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

When Powell becomes a school for black children a year after she began attending, Florence transfers to Central Junior-Senior High and starts taking French in eighth grade. It comes easily and provides her with an automatic femininity without following Granny's rules. Granny is excited when Florence menstruates for the first time, especially when she develops cramps, saying, "her favorite Southern scenario was complete. I had taken to my bed of pain with female trouble" (pg. 98.) While a racial war rages over Central High, Florence reads "The Fountainhead" and tries to imitate Dominique Francon since she seems like a goddess. One of the ladies that Granny nursed dies and bequeaths her a house on 14th Street to Granny. After taking three weeks to clear the house of its contents, the family moves in with Mama and Herb giving up the pretense of being married and taking separate rooms. This leaves one bedroom and a basement apartment which the deed refers to as the maid's apartment. Granny wants Jency to move into the basement apartment because she is having housing problems and has been disowned by her trashy relatives. After consulting a lawyer about the legality of Jency living with them, Granny invites Jency to move in. Granny's attitude about the situation stays with Florence who claims "never had she made it clearer what being a lady meant. She fought for civil rights differently, but she fought" (pg. 108.) Herb works increasingly less, refusing to start his own band or solicit engagements from the Washington Social Register as Granny suggests. Since the house is already paid for, he takes the summer off before getting a job at a music supply store on Saturdays and spending the rest of his time reading.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

By high school, Florence still knows next to nothing about sex and cannot understand the furor over bridal virginity. When Ann comes up with the word "hymen", Florence tries to read the brochure in Mama's box of Tampax because she knows the hymen is related to who can use tampons, but Jency snatches it and tells her to stay pure for Jesus. After locking herself in the bathroom to examine her genitals, Florence finds her clitoris and decides this bump is her maidenhead, declaring that "it was all clear now...Intercourse is when a man presses on the bump until it falls off. When that happens, you aren't a virgin anymore" (pg. 115.) A few months later, her cramps get so bad that Granny takes her to the gynecologist who breaks through to do an exam, and when Granny worries about Florence's husband, the doctor provides her with a certificate of virginity so her future husband will know he did not get "damaged goods" (pg. 115.) Though Florence's fat falls away during her second year of high school and people are again pleased by her appearance, she opts not to date. Though she has physical desires, she does not want to actually date any of the boys she knows. The other girls are sympathetic when they think Florence's parents forbid her to date, but their sympathy vanishes when they learn it is her decision. Florence belongs to a select group of girls, the Brains, who are bound for college. They are feminists without knowing it. Since the non-academic girls do not have a name, Florence describes them to Herb who suggests calling them "malkins", a Shakespearean word meaning women of the lower orders. Realizing that Mama would have been a malkin academically in her school days, Florence consults Herb again because she knows Mama is not a malkin. Using the example of Mama stealing Charlie's lamb, Herb explains a malkin fears not being like everyone else and that is what makes Mama a gentlewoman. Florence continues to study French, and fifth year is the happiest interlude of her life. This is when she reads "Berenice," and Berenice replaces Dominique as her role model as she is neither Virgin nor Venus. When her French teacher suggests she become a translator for a book publisher, the idea appeals to Florence and becomes her ambition as her interest in marriage fades with a clear picture of her future as a career woman. Since she wants to have affairs but fears getting pregnant, she decides she wants a hysterectomy. However, when she consults the school nurse, the nurse is appalled by the idea and insists Florence will change her mind about not wanting children as soon as she has one. Florence does not worry about going to the right school so when she wins a scholarship to a college in Washington, it seems like the perfect solution for her academic aspirations and her family's limited finances. In fact, it sounds so good that she does not bother applying for any other scholarships and simply takes the first one offered to her.



Chapter 9 & 10

Chapter 9 & 10 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 9, the college president welcomes the Class of 1957, claiming educated women make better wives and mothers, and though he does not want the girls to become aggressive career women because "a smart woman is one who's smart enough to know when to be dumb" (pg. 129), a college education is something to fall back on in case they do not marry. He also recommends the Greek life for his students since it is an excellent way to meet people and acquire dates. After the speech, Florence visits her advisor's office to register for classes, but Ruddy, her advisor, seems irritated that she took waiver exams for English Comp and Freshman History. Florence wants to take a waiver exam for French grammar and comp since she finished grammar in her third year of high school, so Ruddy tells her to talk to the French lady, Paula Hale, who agrees to let Florence waive the class. Unfortunately, Paula Hale informs Florence that the college does not offer a French major and language people usually go to Georgetown, but that is a man's school. When she suggests Florence transfer to another school during her junior year to pursue French, Florence is devastated because she cannot transfer as she is attending college on a scholarship. She is so upset she barely manages to get home that evening because she feels she has lost her femininity, but she heeds the inner American voice saying to be her own Venus.

In Chapter 10, Florence accepts an invitation to a fraternity party with her biology lab partner, Larry, because of her sexual desires. She behaves well so that he will ask her out again since it is improper to kiss on a first date. They kiss on the second date, and she looks forward to their third date so the kiss can be wet, though necking is forbidden until the fourth date. While they are necking in Larry's car on their fourth date, Florence allows Larry to touch her breast and reach up her skirt until they are caught by campus security after which Larry acts strangely distant. On Monday, Larry informs Florence they should not see each other anymore. He knows she is a nice girl and must be in love with him because nice girls do not do things like that with guys unless they are in love. Though Florence does some heavy stuff with a lot of different guys, she is still regarded as a Nice Girl because she is not engaging in actual intercourse, she looks like a nice girl and she gets good grades so she must be free of sexual desire. When a sorority offers Florence a bid, she accepts because most boys on campus are in fraternities and they are hesitant to date independent girls.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

During her second year of college, Florence is still appalled by the idea of marriage, and she is the only member of her sorority who does not take the popular Preparation for Marriage course. Her favorite course is Medieval Portraits: Literature as History which is taught by Dr. Newton, the campus heartthrob. When they discuss Griselda, Florence wonders how such a meek woman could represent the Middle Ages when the Virgin Mary was the leading symbol of power. That summer, Florence dates Lloyd, a stuttering man whose proposal Granny is eager for her to accept. Lloyd's personality seems very similar to Preston Hunt, Mama's first beau. After ending her relationship with Lloyd, Florence chooses History as her major and stops dating out of fear she will become so warped she will marry anyone. El is engaged when she returns to school, and she borrows Florence's English textbooks for her fiancé while El spends the year reading about how to make the most of marriage. When Florence asks El's fiancé to return her books, he claims he never borrowed them, and El insists she cannot remember. After calling El a malkin, Florence attends career week where she talks to a procurement officer for the Woman Officer Candidate School at Quantico, and she decides to take a twelve week course over the summer which will allow her to be commissioned as a second Lieutenant in the Marines when she graduates college in a year. At camp, the women are concerned with their appearances in an effort to thwart the lesbian image of female Marines. Florence fails everything except military etiquette, and though she knows the Marines are not for her by the middle of the course, she sticks with it for the money, quitting a week before it ends. In her final interview with the colonel, Florence is offered a recommendation if she wants to try again next summer. She would be a credit to the Marine Corps since she is a "lady to [her] fingertips" (pg. 168.)



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

On her way home from Quantico, Florence finds she has a concise definition of a malkin: "a woman who worries about her femininity" (pg. 169.) When school reopens, her sorority sisters tease her about Marine camp, laughing that all female Marines are lesbians, and when Florence says lesbianism cannot be that bad if they are all against it, she is asked to leave the sorority. As it is her senior year, Florence fears becoming a malkin after graduation since there are no good jobs for women, yet she always thought she would be an exception because of the three women who raised her. The solution comes in Dr. Newton's Renaissance England course when Florence's answer to a question earns her a look of resentment and admiration that takes her seriously. She realizes she must stay in school to continue getting that look. After class, she talks to Dr. Newton about fellowships, and since she wants to see the deep South to compare those women to those of the upper South, Dr. Newton suggests the University of Mississippi. He helps her obtain the fellowship which includes a monthly stipend of \$100 and suggests she apply for a dorm proctorship, gaining a free private room in exchange for chaperoning the undergraduate students. Winning the fellowship fills Florence with triumph and confidence, so she spends her last semester seeking other forms of fun besides academics, and since she is mainly interested in genital intercourse but fears pregnancy, she decides to get a diaphragm. Though most doctors refuse to fit unmarried women, Florence finds a doctor to fit her and obtains a diaphragm. Once prepared, her preferred candidate for a sexual partner is Dr. Newton since they are compatible and she does not need to date him since he is married. She accepts a summer job as typist for the History Department to stay near him, wearing low-cut shirts to draw his attention. Florence and Dr. Ralph Newton flirt, and he invites her out for beer during which they discuss the fact that she is technically a virgin though she has lost her cherry and her innocence. After Florence calls home to say she is working late, Ralph drives them to the department's house of assignation, and they engage in intercourse after Florence inserts her diaphragm. When she sneaks into the bathroom late that night to douche, Granny catches her, and Granny's hysterics alert Mama and Herb. Florence claims she is taking the douche because the doctor at the infirmary recommended it since she has an itch and discharge. Seeing the diaphragm on the door, Mama convinces Granny and Herb to leave Florence in peace, so Florence finishes her douche and returns to bed. Mama never mentions the diaphragm, the douche or Ralph, though she gives him a shrewd look when they meet at Florence's graduation. After spending a charming summer together, Ralph takes Florence to dinner for their first date one week before she leaves for the University of Mississippi. She never sees him again, and their goodbye is friendly rather than tender. They always had an affair, not a relationship, which is what Florence likes best about Ralph. Though she knows she will miss him sexually, she is relieved when she embarks for Memphis a few days later.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Florence sees a different version of the South as she looks out of the bus window on her way from Memphis to Oxford. After the taxi driver takes her to Miz Arvella's dorm, Florence is amazed by the woman's insistence upon repeating everything she says several times. Miz Arvella shows Florence to her room, and after washing up, Florence returns downstairs so Miz Arvella can explain her duties which consist of checking the girls in, keeping track of the late records, chasing boys out of the lounge at midnight and locking the doors. Florence decides to analyze Miz Arvella's echolalia since she has to endure it, but her theories all collapse on the first day of school when the dorm is invaded by girls and mothers of all social ranks who also repeat their words. Once the girls are all signed in, Florence rushes to the History Department to register for her classes, but her thesis advisor transfers her to another advisor when she rejects his idea that she research Syndicalism. She lies to her second advisor, agreeing to think about writing on Pippin the Short, because she is afraid to suggest writing about the historical Berenice after both advisors suggest such masculine subjects. In the library, Florence receives her carrel assignment, a nice alcove with a window which seems more like her first private room than her dorm. A woman in another cubicle walks over to introduce herself as Bres, a graduate assistant in the Classics, and Bres invites Florence to join her for coffee in the smaller annex of the snack bar. As they discuss Florence's idea for a thesis on Berenice, two co-eds smirk at them, and Florence realizes Bres is a lesbian. Bres' friends, Sorella, Augustus, Lucius and Vanny, who are known collectively as the Grope, join them, and it is obvious Bres is their leader as she is the only real intellectual among them. Since Mississippi is a dry state, Florence is about to suggest a drive to a tavern in Batesville which is 30 miles away for malt liquor when Augustus mentions he has a bottle of Thunderbird wine, so they go to Bres' apartment to drink. When Lucius mentions that Bres is an expert at living on grants forever, Florence imagines living in Paris and studying at the Sorbonne with Bres. Discussing Classical studies, Bres says it is frowned upon in Mississippi because it is the symbol of scholarship and thus considered unfeminine, but her eyes widen with unmistakable meaning when Florence holds her gaze. Something inside Florence melts, and she wants to hug Bres. The Grope suggests a drive to Water Valley to buy illegal hooch, but since Florence cannot go because she is on desk work that night, Bres decides to wait until Florence can accompany them. Instead, they go out for burgers, but Florence cannot eat because she has fallen in love at last.



Chapter 14 & 15

Chapter 14 & 15 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 14, the Grope plans the liquor run to Memphis for the following Saturday, but Florence does not see Bres alone for the rest of the week, though she is filled with yearning when she fantasizes about Bres. Florence's study of the classic Southern belle begins with Tulaplee, a rich heiress who makes her callers wait for a long time. Unlike other malkins, Tulaplee is not afraid to treat males brutally and the idea of not being loved has clearly never occurred to her. By the end of the week, Florence realizes Tulaplee is not a malkin but a cuddly barracuda who demands respect. When Florence calls home Friday night, Herb says his ancestry is about to be defined in no uncertain terms and leaves his daughter with two hints to figure it out: the clipping Granny gave her about how God made the Southern woman and the time they heard monks chanting at the Franciscan monastery. Florence is too excited for the outing on Saturday to figure it out, and she warns Miz Arvella that she may not return to the dorm all weekend. In Memphis, they see Tulaplee's car, and the Grope informs Florence that Tulaplee's father owns half the Delta. They buy liquor, eat lunch and head back to Oxford. Once there, Bres gets rid of the rest of the Grope by saying she and Florence need to discuss Florence's thesis. While they drink martinis, Florence tells Bres about Herb's clues, and Bres knows the monks were chanting "ora pro nobis", the Litany of the Virgin, explaining "you could replace any one of those lauds [mystical rose, Mother of Hope, Star of the Sea] with a description of the Southern woman from the clipping and it wouldn't sound any different" (pg. 217.) Florence realizes Southern women repeat themselves like a litany, and when she wonders where Berenice fits in, Bres explains Berenice was a virago, "a woman of great stature, strength and courage who is not feminine in conventional ways" (pg. 218.) Bres leans over and kisses Florence, but as she begins to fondle Florence's breast, Florence has to rush to the bathroom because she drank too much. Bres is asleep when she returns, but as Florence bathes in the morning, Bres picks up where they left off. Later, Bres says they should stick to day visits because she has received anonymous threatening phone calls. When Florence asks how Bres knew about her, Bres says "I figured if you fell in love with a woman who's been dead for two thousand years, the odds were in my favor" (pg. 222.) Bres refuses to participate in Florence's analysis of her lesbianism, and Florence is unprepared for their physical passion. Unfortunately, they experience a special fear at night of the anonymous phone calls because they are considered "nigger-loving Jew Communists" because of their homosexuality (pg. 226.)

In Chapter 15, Florence begins helping Tulaplee with her French homework so she will not fail and get expelled, and Tulaplee thanks her by buying perfume the next time she goes to Memphis. On the night of the Homecoming dance, Tulaplee returns to the dorm 15 minutes early to sit in the lounge with her date, but when she chides him for something that happened at the dance, Florence watches from the foyer as Tulaplee banishes her beau. Florence stays on campus for the Thanksgiving holiday with Bres and the Grope, and after they discuss grants, Bres asks Florence to spend the night



since the phone calls have ceased. Since Florence cannot afford to go home for Christmas and Bres' parents have disowned her due to her lifestyle, they visit the Darnay sisters in Vicksburg, a lesbian couple who masquerade as sisters. Florence expects her first all-lesbian social occasion to be marked by mutual awareness, but it is filled with typical Southern gossip with no indication that the four of them have anything unusual in common. Though Bres insists the sisters know about her and Florence, Florence is afraid to share a bed with Bres for fear the Darnay sisters will hear them.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis

On their return to Oxford, Florence yearns to be with Bres forever, but realizing her year at the University of Mississippi is quickly ending, she discusses it with Bres who suggests she apply for a foundation grant. During exam week, Bres switches carrels at the library so they can be near one another, and watching Bres write in Latin, Florence dreams of the two of them always together, living the life of the mind. Florence wonders what she wants to do for a living, and when she discusses it with Bres, Bres insists she apply for a grant as she can drag out a doctorate for three years. Florence agrees because she knows she must arrange another year at the University of Mississippi since Bres has before they can arrange their distant future. Bres supplies Florence with applications for grants, but while working on them, Florence goes to the reference room for aspirin where she notices "The Writer's Market" which contains a call for first person stories that would be of interest to a housewife. After buying some magazines, Florence thinks "while I had never enjoyed reading true confessions, my whole life had prepared me for writing them... Thanks to Fate, I knew it" (pg. 245.). Thinking of the malkins she has known, Florence writes 3500 words in 3 hours and titles her story "I Committed Adultery in a Diabetic Coma". She writes a second story the next day and mails both to the magazine without telling Bres because there is still time to apply for a grant if her stories do not sell. Florence receives a letter of acceptance from the magazine, along with a check for \$350 and a request for more stories. After recovering from her daze at the idea of being a writer, Florence shares her news with Bres, but Bres is angry because she told Florence to apply for a grant and tells her to go away because she is tired of her. Bres refuses to talk to Florence the next day, so Florence turns to the Grope for advice and learns something similar has happened with all of Bres' past lovers. She sees Bres with another girl the next week, but that is the last time she sees Bres who is killed in a car accident on her way to Batesville that night. As she describes, "Mississippi gave her to me, and Mississippi took her back" (pg. 253.) When Florence begs Bres' mother for something that belonged to Bres, the woman slams the door in her face, and Florence never acquires anything that belonged to Bres since it is all burned. After the first stage of numb grief, Florence begins having sex with lots of men, and the last man she sleeps with, Vardis, is a man who is unconnected with the campus and thus unaware of her relationship with Bres. After their sexual encounter, Florence begins crying, and Vardis tries to comfort her but sobs himself as he tells her about the war. Once Vardis falls asleep, Florence leaves him a note explaining that she cannot see him anymore and she cried because someone she loved died, but his tenderness helped and he is a gentleman. Back on campus, Florence throws away her unfinished thesis and spends her last month at the University of Mississippi writing stories. Shortly after Tulaplee leaves, her maid arrives with a cashmere sweater for Florence, and when she remembers Bres saying the calls stopped abruptly at Thanksgiving, she realizes they were from Tulaplee and thinks of the irony of two types who should be her enemies, a good ole boy and a Southern belle, becoming her friends. On her way home, Florence thinks of how much heartache she could have saved if she had not agreed to go to the

first school Ralph suggested, but she does not wish she had said no to University of Mississippi.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

At home, Herb is the only one who remembers Florence is supposed to earn her Master's degree, but when he asks to see it, she flippantly tells him she got bored with the academic life and became a writer. Although everyone except Mama is distraught at first, Herb comes around when Florence explains how she feels about writing, and Granny and Jency accept her career path when they see her checks. Unable to readjust to sharing a room with Granny, Florence acquires an efficiency apartment in the Mount Pleasant district and manages to support herself, though she returns home every Sunday evening for dinner. Growing lonely, she decides to find someone but is unsure whether she is straight, gay or both, so she decides she needs more female lovers to figure it out. Unfortunately, her hesitant searches in D. C. museums and concerts yield no lesbians. At home for dinner one Sunday night, Jency declines eating because she feels unwell, and when they hear a crash downstairs, they find her on the floor where she dies before Granny can reach the basement. At Jency's funeral, Herb offers a eulogy about how Jency made him understand what a lady is such as "a woman who is so resolved to be respected that she can make herself so even amidst an army of soldiers" (pg. 272.) As they leave, Mama smiles at Herb and tells him he did a good job, and he smiles back. Florence admits she will never understand those too. Granny's health deteriorates as she grieves Jency, and when she says Florence has no business living alone, it allows Florence to move home while salvaging her pride. Granny decides to sell her house in D. C. and move back to Ballston with Mama, Herb and Florence. Mama joins a ladies bowling league and insists Herb and Florence watch her bowl every Tuesday night. When Granny's health forces her family to place her in a nursing home, she tries to play matchmaker with Florence and Fred, her neighbor's son, but Florence finds Fred boring. While visiting her grandmother one day, Granny points out Mrs. Kincaid's daughter and her lover, two "poor twisted women who love each other" (pg. 276.) Devising errands to run for Mrs. Kincaid, Florence soon goes to the coffee shop with the two women, and they catch on after a few weeks and introduce her to their friends. Florence's first by-line appears in print under the pen name Ruding Upton King, and Granny is pleased when she sees the story. Granny's health deteriorates rapidly over the next few weeks, and when Florence notices her face lose its roundness and smallness as she sleeps, she leans over to see Granny stop breathing. After the funeral, the family sits around, talking about Granny, and when Evelyn claims she was a lady, Florence objects that Granny and Jency were better than ladies: they were viragoes. Mama laughs that Florence has finally told her something she always wanted to know. She has always known she was different, and now she realizes it is because she is a virago. She likes it so much she has it painted on her bowling ball.



Characters

Florence King

Florence King is the narrator, author, and main character of "Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady." After Florence is born, Granny attempts to train Florence to become a lady while Herb educates her. When the family takes a vacation to Colonial Beach, Evelyn causes a scene by claiming her womb is falling out, but Florence is relieved when Herb tells her she does not have to be like Evelyn when she grows up. Florence is promoted to Kindergarten A because she is too advanced for Kindergarten B which worries Granny because ladies should not be too bright. Granny and Jency force Florence to accompany them on their temporal acts of mercy, visiting the sick and such.

Herb tells Mama, Granny, and Florence that it is impossible for an American woman to be feminine because they have no defining goddesses. After being threatened by Harriet Mudd when she tries to be friendly, Florence learns not to try to make herself liked. When Granny inherits a house on 14th Street, the family moves in, and Granny insists upon asking Jency to live with them. In high school, Florence suffers from menstrual cramps, and since the doctor has to break her hymen to examine her, he gives her a certificate of virginity so her husband will know he is not getting damaged goods. Florence chooses not to date in high school, and she labels the non-academic girls as malkins, women who fear not being like everyone else. She studies French and begins to idolize Berenice.

Florence attends college at American University because she acquires a scholarship, but she is distraught when she learns she cannot major in French and must switch her major to History. She joins a sorority to obtain dates to appease her sexual desires, but she quits the sorority after attending Marine camp one summer when she returns to the sorority and her sisters mock the female Marines as lesbians. Worried about becoming a malkin after graduation, Florence applies for and receives a fellowship to the University of Mississippi. After obtaining a diaphragm, she loses her virginity to Dr. Newton.

At the University of Mississippi, Florence meets Bres and falls in love, though she cannot spend the night because they fear the anonymous phone calls Bres has received in the past. Since Florence wants to be with Bres forever, she agrees to Bres' suggestion that she apply for fellowships, but when she finds a call for confession stories, she writes and submits two stories. Florence is excited when her stories are accepted, but Bres is furious because she wanted Florence to apply for a fellowship, ending their relationship as a result. Soon after, Bres is killed in a car accident, and Florence responds by sleeping with numerous men. Florence finishes her year at the University of Mississippi by ignoring her thesis and writing more stories.

Back in Washington D. C., Florence tells her family about becoming a writer and moves to her own apartment while searching for other lesbians in vain since she is lonely.



When Jency dies, Herb eulogizes her as a lady, and soon after, Granny decides to sell the house on 14th Street and move back to the family homestead in Ballston, Virginia with Mama, Herb and Florence. When Granny has to be placed in a nursing home, Florence finally meets other lesbians through the daughter of one of Granny's neighbors, Mrs. Kincaid. After Granny dies, Florence argues with Evelyn that Granny and Jency were not ladies. They were viragoes or women of great courage, strength and stature who are not conventionally feminine. Mama has always known she was different, but now she understands it is because she is a virago.

Granny

Granny, Lura Ruding nee Upton, is Florence's grandmother who lives with Florence and her parents. Since Granny's attempts to raise Mama as a Southern lady fail, she is eager for a second chance to rear a lady when Florence is born about a year after Mama marries Herb, so she moves in with them. Granny attempts to train Florence to become a lady while Herb educates her. Florence is promoted to Kindergarten A because she is too advanced for Kindergarten B which worries Granny because ladies should not be too bright. Granny and Jency force Florence to accompany them on their temporal acts of mercy, visiting the sick and such.

When Granny inherits a house on 14th Street, the family moves in, and Granny insists upon asking Jency to live with them. When Jency dies, Herb eulogizes her as a lady, and soon after, Granny decides to sell the house on 14th Street and move back to the family homestead in Ballston, Virginia with Mama, Herb and Florence. When Granny has to be placed in a nursing home, Florence finally meets other lesbians through the daughter of one of Granny's neighbors, Mrs. Kincaid. After Granny dies, Florence argues with Evelyn that Granny and Jency were not ladies; they were viragoes, women of great courage, strength and stature who are not conventionally feminine. Mama has always known she was different, but now she understands it is because she is a virago.

Mama

Mama, Louise King, is Florence's mother. She does not become the lady that Granny wants, but it hurts her to know Granny would prefer Evelyn as a daughter. Mama marries Herb and gives birth to Florence. As a child, Florence believes Mama is trying to kill her until Mama proves her unconditional love by coming to her rescue twice. Mama works for the telephone company and receives several promotions. When Florence explains what a virago is, Mama likes the term because she has always known she was different but not why; now, she knows she is a virago, and she has the word painted on her bowling ball.

Herb

Herbert King is Florence's father and Mama's husband. He is an Englishman and fairly well-educated, and he is a musician and bartender when Mama meets and marries him.



Herb helps educate Florence and he eventually quits his jobs and spends his days reading. Herb is fairly forward-thinking and helps Florence define the term "malkin." He is one of her three caregivers who greatly influence her life.

Jensy Custis

Jensy Custis is a black woman who worked for Granny in Ballston and when Granny moves to Washington D. C., she hires Jensy to clean Mama's apartment once a week. Jensy and Granny teach Florence to become a lady with lessons about caring for her belongings and visiting sick people. When Mrs. Dabney dies and leaves her house on 14th Street to Granny, Granny insists Jensy live with them in the maid's apartment in the basement. Granny and Jensy are close friends and always agree on things, such as the proper behavior in given situations. One Sunday night shortly after Florence returns home from the University of Mississippi, Jensy dies in the basement, causing Granny to grieve greatly. Her funeral service is beautiful, and Herb eulogizes her and her status as a lady. Due to her grief at losing her friend, Granny decides to sell the house on 14th Street and move back to Ballston.

Ann Hopkins

Ann Hopkins is an overdeveloped girl in Florence's sixth grade class who wants to be assigned to 7A2 in order to be popular since it is important for girls to be average. She wants to be a wife and mother when she grows up, and she is the leader of the malkins at Florence's school.

Larry

Larry is Florence's biology partner in college and the first guy she dates, though she only does so because of her desire to enact her sexual fantasies. On their fourth date, she lets him reach under her skirt, so he breaks up with her because she is a nice girl and nice girls only let guys do that when they are in love.

Dr. Ralph Newton

Dr. Ralph Newton is a history professor in his late thirties who is the campus heartthrob. He recommends Florence apply for a fellowship at the University of Mississippi, and Florence loses her virginity to him that summer, enjoying the benefits of a friendly affair instead of a relationship.



Lloyd

Lloyd is a guy that Florence dates in college. He is five years older and a hesitating man who she cannot stand. When Lloyd proposes, his mother and Granny want Florence to marry him, but she stops dating him.

Bres

Bres is a beautiful twenty-seven-year-old woman at the University of Mississippi. She is the leader of the Grope and the only true academic among them. She is a lesbian who dates Florence, but she breaks up with Florence for writing stories instead of applying for fellowships as she insists. Bres dies in a car accident shortly after ending her relationship with Florence.

Tulaplee

Tulaplee is a beautiful Southern belle from a rich family dorming in Florence's dorm. Florence helps her with her French assignments and shows herself to be a great lady and good friend to Florence, though she was the one who originally made anonymous, threatening phone calls to Bres.

Vardis

Vardis is a good ole boy who is the last in a series of men Florence sleeps with after Bres dies. Though he personifies the best and worst aspects of the South, he comforts Florence, causing her to see him as a gentleman.



Objects/Places

Ballston

Ballston is the town in Virginia where Florence's family homestead is and where Mama was raised. The family returns to Ballston after Jency dies.

Washington, D. C.

Florence is born and raised in Washington D. C. because Mama moves to the city with Herb after they get married. Granny moves in with them while Mama is pregnant with Florence.

Park Road

Park Road is where Mama and Herb set up house in Northwest Washington D. C. in a 2-bedroom apartment. Granny moves in with them while Mama is pregnant with Florence, but the family is evicted in January 1941 because the building is condemned.

1020 Monroe

Florence's family moves to a 2-bedroom apartment around the corner from Park Road after being evicted because the building is condemned in January 1941. Herb likes the apartment because it has an alcove off the master bedroom.

The Ovariad

The Ovariad is what Herb calls Granny's Sunday monologues with Aunt Nana about female troubles. Granny continues the Ovariad at the movies whenever the plot gives her the slightest encouragement.

Raymond Elementary

Raymond Elementary is where Florence attends primary school. After her first day of Kindergarten B, she is promoted to Kindergarten A. She does not get along with her peers, other than Helen and Peg.

Charlie's Lamb

Charlie's lamb is a memorial grave marker for Charlie, Granny's son who died when he was a child. When Uncle Botetourt decides to replace the old tombstones with one big



marker, Florence objects that he cannot take Charlie's lamb. After much arguing between Uncle Botetourt and Mama, Aunt Charlotte convinces Uncle Botetourt to pay to remove the lamb and give it to Florence, but Mama refuses to allow him to give it to them. To Granny's consternation, Mama takes a pickaxe to the cemetery and steals the lamb, making Florence see Mama as her "parfit ungentil knight-mother" (pg. 78.)

Powell Junior High

Florence attends Powell Junior High, located above 14th and Park Road, starting in seventh grade. Her peer problems continue, but when her attempts to befriend Harriet Mudd result in threats, Florence learns not to try to make people like her.

House on 14th Street

When Mrs. Dabney dies, she leaves her house on 14th Street to Granny who had nursed her during her illness. The house is a row home out near the Maryland line with 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms and a maid's apartment in the basement. Granny insists on asking Jency to move in with them and live in the maid's apartment. After Jency dies, Granny decides to sell the house on 14th Street and move back to Ballston.

Malkin

Malkin is a Shakespearean term for a woman of a lower order which Herb suggests to Florence as a name for the non-academic girls in her high school. Malkins care about their appearances and fear being unlike everyone else. After attending Marine camp over the summer, Florence defines a malkin as "a woman who worries about her femininity" (pg. 169.)

American University

When Florence wins a four year scholarship to American University, she does not bother researching any other schools. She attends college because she wants to study French and be a career woman, so she is very disappointed to learn she cannot major in French, switching to History instead. Florence joins a sorority because she wants to fool around with boys and the fraternity guys do not date independent girls. Dr. Newton helps her obtain a fellowship at the University of Mississippi because she feels she has to continue her education since she enjoys the respect she gets for being an educated woman. Before leaving Washington D. C., Florence loses her virginity to Dr. Newton and engages in an affair over the summer.



University of Mississippi

The University of Mississippi is also called Ole Miss, and this is where Florence acquires a fellowship because she wants to go to the deep South to compare those women to the women of the Upper South. Dr. Newton suggests University of Mississippi and helps Florence apply. At the university, Florence meets Bres and falls in love. Rather than apply for another fellowship, she begins writing stories, but Bres breaks up with her because of her writing.

Granny's Nursing Home

After Florence's family moves back to Ballston, Granny's health deteriorates to the point that they have to put her in a nursing home. While there, Granny tries to play matchmaker, setting Florence up with her neighbor's grandson. This is also where Florence meets Mrs. Kincaid's daughter and her lesbian partner, and they introduce Florence to some of their friends. Granny dies in the nursing home shortly after Florence's first article is published.



Themes

Femininity

As suggested by the title, a major theme in "Confessions of a Southern Lady" is femininity. As Florence King, the author, explains in the Prologue, ladies only enjoy a generic recognition in the South where the lady is considered the perfection of femininity. Mama struggles with Granny over her image when she is young and it hurts her to know that Granny would prefer her ridiculously feminine cousin, Evelyn, as a daughter. When Florence is born, Granny cannot resist taking advantage of a second chance to rear a lady. Granny and Jency teach Florence the lady-like virtue of caring for things through polishing silver and caring for people by visiting sick neighbors and friends; Granny's charitable acts stem from her desire to be recognized as a great lady. When Evelyn has hysterics about her womb falling out during a family vacation at Colonial Beach, Florence is relieved when Herb, her father, tells her she does not have to be like Evelyn when she grows up. While Florence is in school, Granny worries about her being promoted several times for fear she will be an old maid since ladies should never be bookish. Similarly, Ann Hopkins wants to be assigned to 7A2 when they begin junior high school because it is important for girls to be average.

When Florence begins French in eighth grade, she enjoys it because she believes it gives her an automatic femininity. In high school, Herb helps Florence come up with a name for the non-academic girls in her school: malkin, women who worry about their femininity and what people think about them. Florence emulates Berenice because she is neither a Virgin nor a Venus, and in college, she learns that Berenice is a Virago. Though the term has come to be derogatory, its original use was to define a woman of great stature, strength and courage who is not conventionally feminine. She learns this term from Bres, her girlfriend during her yearlong fellowship at the University of Mississippi. While at Ole Miss, Florence also befriends Tulaplee, a perfect Southern lady, after realizing that Tulaplee is not a malkin because she does not cater to her beaux. She does not fear being unloved because the idea has clearly never occurred to her. At Jency's funeral, Herb eulogizes her by claiming she helped him understand what being a lady means, which is "a woman who is so resolved to be respected that she can make herself so even amidst an army of soldiers" (pg. 272.) After Granny dies, Florence argues with Evelyn that Granny and Jency were not ladies because they were viragoes which is better than being a lady. Mama is thrilled with the term because now she knows she is different because she is a virago.

Education

An important theme in King's memoir is education. When she is a child, Herb takes her to the library and teaches her to print her name and write in script. After one day in Kindergarten B, Florence is promoted to Kindergarten A because she is too advanced for Kindergarten B. Though she has peer problems, her principal also allows her to skip



grade 3A. Granny tries to rear Florence as a Southern lady, objecting to her skipping grades because ladies should never be bookish and she worries her granddaughter will be an old maid.

In junior high school, Florence is assigned to 7A3 which is designated as above average. Florence reads a lot, and she begins studying French in eighth grade. Since she excels in her language studies, Florence decides she wants to be a translator, preferring the image of being a career woman to that of a wife and mother. Florence earns a scholarship to American University but is devastated when she learns there is no French major and must switch her study focus to History. After college, she chooses to continue her education because she fears becoming a malkin and likes the respect she receives for being an educated woman. During her fellowship at the University of Mississippi, Florence falls in love with Bres and dreams of living an intellectual life with her. Unfortunately, the relationship ends when Florence writes stories for a magazine instead of applying for fellowships like Bres wanted. Florence quits her studies and becomes a writer.

Sexuality

An important theme in "Confessions of a Southern Lady" is that of sexuality, though it does not develop until later in the book. When Florence is eight years old, she reads "Forever Amber" but is forced to ask her friend, Peg, to clarify the sex scenes since Florence knows nothing about sex. She still knows very little by high school, so when she learns the term hymen, she tries to read a Tampax manual to learn more, but Jency catches her and tells her to keep herself pure for Jesus. After examining herself and finding her clitoris, Florence believes women lose their virginity when a man presses against that bump until it falls off. She is soon disillusioned when a gynecologist has to break through her hymen to give her an exam because of her intense cramps; however, he provides her with a certificate of virginity which she can give her husband so he knows he did not get damaged goods.

Though Florence opts not to date in high school, she yields to her sexual desires and dates solely for that purpose in college, even joining a sorority since the male students were hesitant to date independent women. Florence is physical with many guys but is still considered a nice girl because she does not have intercourse, she looks like a nice girl, and everyone assumes she is free from sexual desires since she gets good grades. After acquiring a fellowship at the University of Mississippi, Florence obtains a diaphragm and loses her virginity to Dr. Newton, her history professor; however, she does not fall in love until she meets Bres, a lesbian at the University of Mississippi, and she is surprised by their physical passion. Florence is heartbroken when Bres ends the relationship, and she deals with her grief by sleeping with many men. Returning to Washington D. C., Florence feels unresolved about her lesbian experience and decides she needs to experiment with more female lovers to decide whether she is gay, straight or both, but she is unable to locate other lesbians at the museums and concerts where she searches. Florence is finally introduced to other lesbians through the daughter of Mrs. Kincaid, Granny's neighbor at the nursing home.

Style

Perspective

"Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady" is told from the perspective of the author and main character, Florence King, which is imperative for this form of writing, a memoir. In this book, she details her youth up until the end of her academic career and the beginning of her writing career which also happens to be around the time that Granny died. Granny attempted to rear Florence as a Southern lady, but Florence allows the reader to determine whether Granny succeeded or failed. In this subject matter, Florence is the only perspective qualified to retell the story of her early life, and she focuses heavily on how she was influenced by her three caretakers, Granny, Mama and Herb.

The intended audience of this memoir is likely fans of her writing or at least those familiar with her career, but any reader is able to enjoy the comical anecdotes she shares. Florence King writes her memoir with the intent of telling the story of her youth in a comical and entertaining way, often wittily mocking the requirements for being considered a Southern lady. The contrasting influences in her life result in the construction of Florence King, a writer and genuinely interesting person.

Tone

Florence King's memoir, "Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady", is written using a witty and mocking tone as she details her Granny's attempts to develop a Southern lady out of her granddaughter. By writing from a later time in her life, King displays the gender inequalities she experienced in her youth with a comical approach, allowing more modern readers a glimpse of the America of her youth when women were expected to marry and bare children. Though King does not express any bitterness toward the sexism she was subjected to, most modern readers will be aghast at some of the anecdotes in this book, such as the one about gynecologist who breaks her hymen to perform an exam and gives her a certificate of virginity so her husband will know he is not getting damaged goods.

Despite the bigoted attitudes represented in the memoir, readers will enjoy King's sense of humor as she mocks the conventions of her day. She does not seem to take particular pride in defying the role assigned to her by society, but she seems proud of who she has become. Her memoir also provides readers with the opportunity to become acquainted with the people who majorly influenced her life, showing the conflicting ideas which lead to King becoming the woman she is.



Structure

"Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady" is comprised of 278 pages which contain a Prologue and 17 chapters, each of which average around 10 to 15 pages in length and are numbered, rather than titled. Each chapter contains a collection of anecdotes about King's early life revolving around her family, her education and her relationships, as well as the contrast between her Granny's attempts to rear a Southern lady and King's desire to become an educated career woman. The first chapter provides background information on Granny and Mama's relationship which foreshadows and explains Granny's excitement at being offered a second chance to raise a lady.

The book's format is useful as it is fairly chronological, but it also provides King with the opportunity for related tangents which she weaves into her main narrative effortlessly. The author makes occasional social comments but mostly focuses on sharing anecdotes from her youth which fully explore the influences that shaped who she became. King's purpose in writing the memoir seems mainly to be sharing her history, but it also provides her with a medium for mocking the social conventions that dictate what a lady is even as she determines that there is something better, a virago like Granny, Jency and Mama. King's memoir is informative, funny, and entertaining. It is overall an enjoyable read.



Quotes

"There are ladies everywhere, but they enjoy generic recognition only in the South. There is a New England old maid but not a New England lady. There is a Midwestern farm wife but not a Midwestern lady. There is most assuredly a California girl, but if anyone spoke of a California lady, even Phil Donahue and Alan Alda would laugh. If you wish to understand the American woman, study the Southern woman. The sweetening process that feminists call 'socialization' is simply a less intense version of what goes on in every Southern family. We call it 'rearing'. If the rearing is successful, it results in that perfection of femininity known as a lady" (Prologue, pg. 1.)

"Whether she succeeded in making a lady out of me is for you to decide, but I will say one thing in my own favor before we begin. No matter which sex I went to bed with, I never smoked on the street" (Prologue, pg. 2.)

"I'd like to kill you, Preston. I'd like to get in my car and run right over you. If I were a man, I'd wipe the floor with you! I'd knock you into the middle of next week! Stop doing your mouth that way. You know what I mean- twisting it down at the corner and making that squirty noise. Why are you sitting with your feet folded one over the other? You always sit like that! I hate the way you sit! I hate your feet! Shut up! Get out!" (Mama, Chapter 1, pg. 11.)

"Expecting Granny to stay away from an unformed blob of female material was like expecting a cobra to stay away from a flute" (Chapter 2, pg. 28.)

"I think their permissiveness sprang from an unconscious wish on all their parts to regard our family group as three siblings with Granny at the matriarchal helm. Mama wanted a buddy instead of a husband, Herb wanted an intellectual companion instead of a wife, and Granny wanted to boss a show, any show. By never saying Daddy, I symbolically eliminated the patriarchal figure that would have spoiled their game" (Chapter 3, pg. 32.)

"Something that actually did run in our family was agnosticism. Herb believed in reincarnation, Mama preferred unorthodox home truths like 'When you're dead, you're dead,' and Granny's theology had been enervated by her superiority complex. A lifetime of looking down on the Bible Belt South as only a Virginian can had driven her into a bizarre form of heresy: Christianity reminded her of places like Georgia. As usual there was an etiquette factor in her thinking. She objected strenuously to the Baptist habit of referring to 'Jesus' as though he lived down the road and always carefully said 'Our Lord Jesus Christ,' yet her views on his place in the heavenly pecking order were bleak" (Chapter 3, pg. 36-37.)

"Evelyn's problem has nothing to do with either the Upton womb or the Cunningham taint. She's suffering from historical displacement brought on by her unsuccessful struggle to be a Southern belle... [A Southern belle is] a state of mind. One which Evelyn is geographically incapable of achieving. The belle is a produce of the Deep



South, which is a product of the nineteenth century and the Age of Romanticism. Virginia is a product of the eighteenth century. It's impossible to extract a belle from the Age of Reason" (Herb, Chapter 4, pg. 52-53.)

"You decide what runs in you. Don't ever let anyone or anything else decide for you. Is that clear?" (Herb, Chapter 4, pg. 57.)

"You know, this Evelyn business has been hard on your mother. Knowing that Mrs. Ruding would prefer Evelyn for a daughter has hurt her more than she lets on. If she seems brusque at times, try to understand her. Imagine how you would feel if you had a sister that everyone liked best" (Herb, Chapter 4, pg. 58.)

"Jensy had a strongly developed sense of Christian charity. Granny had a strongly developed sense of Granny; her good works sprang from a desire to win for herself that Holy Grail of Southern accolades, 'great lady'" (Chapter 5, pg. 66.)

"Something told me that if I had been plug-ugly or a boy, no one would have cared what I was like, but a pretty girl was supposed to be a melody, not a misanthrope" (Chapter 5, pg. 73.)

"My parfit ungentil knight-mother... How I wish Chaucer could have known her. Years later when I read 'This Side of Paradise', I underlined a passage that reminded me of her: 'She had that coarse streak usually found in natures that are both fine and big'" (Chapter 5, pg. 78.)

"Get your nose out of that book! That's the biggest book I ever saw! I don't know how you can pick it up, much less read it. I have told you and told you that a lady is accomplished but never bookish" (Granny, Chapter 6, pg. 80.)

"An American Virgin would never dare command; an American Venus would never dare exist... America is a Protestant country and a puritanical country. There's no female ideal in America, never has been. Therefore, it's culturally impossible for the American woman to be feminine because she has no defining goddesses... Their chief ambition has been to Americanize themselves. And to that end, they've weakened their goddess heritage. The American Catholic doesn't see the Virgin as the figure of commanding womanliness that the medieval world worshipped. She's been turned into a long-suffering Irish mother. American woman who copy that kind of femininity will end up as martyrs" (Herb, Chapter 6, pg. 81.)

"I want to be in 7A2 so I can be popular. Average kids are always the most popular. It's even more important for girls to be average. Boys don't like smart girls but you have to be smart enough to ask the right questions when a boy is explaining something to you, so that's why I want to be average. You get the most dates" (Ann Hopkins, Chapter 6, pg. 87.)

"[Granny's] favorite Southern scenario was complete. I had taken to my bed of pain with female trouble" (Chapter 7, pg. 98.)



"Don't worry, I'll give her a certificate of virginity. She can show it to her husband and he'll know he didn't get damaged goods" (Doctor, Chapter 8, pg. 115.)

"Now some people ask, why bother to send a girl to college? A woman's place is in the home, they'll tell you. Educate a woman and you'll ruin a good wife and mother. Well, I have an answer for people who say that- an educated woman makes a better wife and mother! A wife has to entertain her husband's business associates. How is she going to do that if she isn't well educated? She's got to be able to talk to her husband intelligently, to meet him on his own level. She can't do that without a college education... You girls get your degrees so your marriages will be equal partnerships! Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that I don't like a woman to be a real woman... I'm not saying that I want you girls to go out and become hard, aggressive career women, because no man likes women who compete with him. You know the old saying: 'A smart woman is one who's smart enough to know when to be dumb!'" (College president, Chapter 9, pg. 128-129.)

"You're a nice girl, so I know you must be in love with me because a nice girl doesn't let a guy do...that...what you let me do, I mean, unless she's in love with him. I'm not ready to fall in love" (Larry, Chapter 10, pg. 141.)

"Keep dating and you will become so sick, so badly crippled, so deformed, so emotionally warped and mentally defective that you will marry anybody" (Chapter 11, pg. 163.)

"It was a look that took me seriously, a look that saw me. I needed the hostility it contained... Now, scholarship and 'the look' were one and the same in my mind; once I left school and joined the ranks of so-called career women, I would stop getting it. I must never stop getting it; therefore, I had to stay in school." Chapter 12, page 175

"I should have been hungry but I could barely finish a hamburger. I had fallen in love at last" (Chapter 13, pg. 207.)

"I had to hand it to her. The malkins I had known all lacked the courage to treat males so brutally. They were too afraid of being stood up or losing a boy's love, but Tulaplee had none of their insecurities. The idea of not being loved clearly had never occurred to her" (Chapter 14, pg. 210.)

"Repetitive speech comforts people, but the Baptist Church has no litanies. Henry Adams was right. The American woman does have to invent her own feminine ideal, and the problem gets worse the further south you go. The Maryland woman is Catholic, so she's already got the Virgin. The Virginian woman is Episcopalian, which helps some because the Episcopal Church is soft-shell Catholic. But Deep South women don't have any Virgin at all, so they keep saying everything over and over- it's a way of saying rosaries to themselves" (Chapter 14, pg. 218.)

"Oh, something about the way you were looking at your carrel, caressing the desk and all. You were making love to that tight little space. Then later on in the coffeeshop, something came over you when you talked about Berenice, a kind of glow. I figured if



you fell in love with a woman who's been dead for two thousand years, the odds were in my favor" (Bres, Chapter 14, pg. 222.)

"I am sure of one thing: if I had never known Ann Hopkins, I would not have turned to the section on 'True Confessions', and if I had not done that, I would not have read the first guideline" (Chapter 16, pg. 244.)

"I walked out the door in a daze and sat down on the post office steps. I was a writer. It was as simple as that. I had been one all along. In high school, doing French translations, I had been a writer without even knowing it" (Chapter 16, pg. 248.)

"I'm taking the bus back to Oxford. I can't see you anymore, but I want you to know it's not because of anything you did or said. I cried because somebody I loved died. Your kindness helped me more than I can say. You're a gentleman" (Florence in note to Vardis, Chapter 16, pg. 261.)

"I intended to write something better eventually but I kept at the confessions for the time being. Besides supporting me, they were the best possible training for a fledgling writer. The most important thing they taught me was how to 'Capture your reader, let him not depart From dull beginnings that refuse to start'" (Chapter 17, pg. 267.)

"When Mrs. Custis said that, I knew at long last what a lady was. In the words of the Spanish writer Cervantes, a lady is a woman who 'is so resolved to be respected that she can make herself so even amidst an army of soldiers.' That was surely Mrs. Custis. I know she will have her armor, and I know she will wear it well" (Herb, Chapter 17, pg. 272.)

"[Granny] was something better than a lady, so was Jency. They were viragoes... The only V worth having. A virago is a woman of great stature, strength and courage who is not feminine in the conventional ways" (Florence, Chapter 17, pg. 277-278.)

"Now here comes Little Egghead that swallowed the dictionary to tell me something I've always wanted to know. I knew there was something different about me, but it's not because I'm a slewfoot, it's because I'm a virago!" (Mama, Chapter 17, pg. 278.)



Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast Mama and Granny.

How does Florence's parentage and upbringing affect who she becomes?

What is a malkin, and why is Florence so concerned with accurately defining this term?

Who is Bres and how does she alter Florence's life?

Compare and contrast the various descriptions of a lady which are found in this book.

Why and how does Florence become a writer?

How is a woman's education treated while Florence is in school?

Which anecdote in this book is your favorite and why?